

HOUND HUNTING IN VIRGINIA: A WAY FORWARD

APRIL PROJECT UPDATE NEWSLETTER

A Way Forward for Hound Hunting in Virginia

Issues related to hound hunting in Virginia are not new. In recent years, however, the tone and urgency of concerns have increased. To ensure that the tradition of hound hunting can continue, the Hunting with Hounds in Virginia project was initiated to proactively address concerns related to hound hunting in the Commonwealth. This process, facilitated by Virginia Tech, relies heavily on the involvement of stakeholders from start to finish. The goal of the public involvement process is to *provide diverse opportunities for hunting with hounds in Virginia in a manner that is fair, sportsmanlike, and consistent with the rights of property owners and other citizens.*

There are many opportunities for public involvement throughout the process. Early on, focus group meetings were held to identify issues related to hound hunting from the perspective of various stakeholder groups (details on page 3). Focus groups are structured interviews with small groups of people invited to represent the points of view of groups of interest. Participants were invited because they expressed interest in participating, were involved in hound hunting issues in the past, were recognized leaders in their communities, or represented the views of local organizations. Obviously, everyone could not participate at this level, but no group with a stake in hound hunting purposefully was excluded.

Throughout the process, citizens have written to the VDGIF and Virginia Tech to express their opinions or concerns and to offer suggestions. Every letter and email received is being analyzed at Virginia Tech to determine what types of experiences stakeholders are writing about, and from where the correspondence is coming in the state. A summary of results will be available early this summer.

An informal survey, developed by Virginia Tech, is now available for anyone to participate in (details on page 4). This informal survey is designed to obtain more information from stakeholders on the types of experiences they have had related to hound hunting in Virginia and will help to further clarify issues and identify geographic areas where such issues are most prevalent as well as areas where hound hunters, landowners, and non-hound hunters are working well together.

Information gathered from focus group meetings, letters and emails, and the informal survey will be reviewed and evaluated by the Stakeholder Advisory Committee (SAC; details on page 2). In cooperation with the VDGIF Technical Committee, the SAC will examine each identified issue and develop suggestions for how these issues can best be addressed. During late summer 2008, a final series of open public meetings will be held statewide to solicit feedback on the SAC's suggestions; public input will be used during development of final recommendations, now scheduled to be presented to the Board of Game and Inland Fisheries in October 2008.

Hound hunting is a time-honored tradition in the Commonwealth. This ongoing public input process has been designed to be transparent, fair, and equitable. It has been designed to provide many, varied opportunities for feedback and involvement of interested citizens. This newsletter is another way the VDGIF and Virginia Tech are reaching out to involve stakeholders during this process. For more information, please call 540-231-0961 or visit <http://www.dgif.state.va.us/hunting/hounds/>. Your participation is welcomed and encouraged.

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Introducing the Stakeholder Advisory Committee

The Stakeholder Advisory Committee (SAC) represents the many values of Virginia's citizens interested in hunting with hounds. It will meet several times to learn about the issues, understand the viewpoints of affected stakeholders, and consider alternative strategies for addressing the issues identified through the public input process.

How Were SAC Members Selected?

The SAC was developed mostly from those who participated in the focus group meetings. In selecting individuals to serve on the SAC, VDGIF and Virginia Tech established several criteria. The first and most important criterion was that individuals must agree with the goal of the process. Selected members also had to fairly represent the interests of all stakeholders in their interest group. Third, those selected had to be open-minded and good listeners. Fourth, VDGIF and Virginia Tech looked to maintain a balance between hound hunters and other valid stakeholders on the committee. Based on these criteria, 3 deer hound hunters, 1 bear hound hunter, 2 mounted fox hound hunters, 1 non-mounted fox hunter, 1 raccoon hound hunter, 1 rabbit hound hunter, 1 corporate landowner (Westvaco), 1 federal land/law enforcement officer (US Forest Service), 2 non-hound hunters, 4 private landowners, and 1 animal control officer were invited to participate on the SAC. In total, there are 9 hound and 9 "non-hound" stakeholders on the SAC. Biographies of each SAC member are available on the VDGIF web site.

What Will the SAC Do?

The SAC and a VDGIF Technical Committee will cooperatively integrate and evaluate value-based information gathered from the public input process and technical information about the biological, economic, and social aspects of hound hunting to develop sound recommendations to achieve the goal of this process: to provide diverse opportunities for hunting with hounds in a manner that is fair, sportsmanlike, and consistent with the rights of private property owners and others. It is important to note that the SAC has no authority to change any current rules, regulations, or law; rather, they, in cooperation with the Technical Committee, will issue a report with background information and recommendations to the VDGIF to identify a way forward for an important tradition in a modern world.

At their first meeting, the SAC reviewed the Hunting with Hounds in Virginia project goal and public input process, and took initial steps to accurately define issues related to hound hunting in the Commonwealth. At the next meeting, the SAC will receive a preliminary report from the Technical Committee on the tradition, status, values, concerns, and legal aspects of hunting with hounds in Virginia. Complete notes from all SAC meetings will be provided to the public via the VDGIF web site. To request a paper copy of the meeting minutes, please contact Sarah Kozlowski at 540-231-0961.

How Do I Contact My Representative?

SAC members must maintain open communication with the citizen interests they represent and other committee members (as well as the VDGIF and Virginia Tech). To provide SAC members with your comments, opinions, or suggestions, write to Hound Hunting SAC c/o Sarah Kozlowski, 111 Cheatham Hall, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA 24060-0321 or HoundHuntingSAC@vt.edu.

"The first and most important criterion was that individuals must agree with the goal of the process."

"...the SAC has no authority to change any current rules, regulations, or law; rather, they, in cooperation with the Technical Committee, will report findings to the VDGIF Board about hound hunting as it exists today in Virginia, and suggest approaches can be adopted by the VDGIF or others to ensure that hound hunting can continue in the future."

Our goal is to provide diverse opportunities for hunting with hounds in Virginia in a manner that is fair, sportsmanlike and consistent with the rights of property owners and other citizens.

Focus Group Meetings: A Summary

Focus group meetings were held with 9 different stakeholder groups. Of the 360 people invited to attend a focus group meeting, 157 participated in one of the 16 meetings held during late November and early December, 2007. Attendees were invited to participate in focus group meetings because they had expressed an interest in the hound hunting study, were recognized leaders in their community, or had involvement in hound hunting issues in the past, either as a hunter, hunt club member, landowner, or other capacity. Officers and members of prominent Virginia sportsmen's groups participated in focus group meetings, including representatives from the VA Foxhound Club, VA Deer Hunters Association, VA Hunting Dog Alliance, VA Dog Owners Association, and VA Bear Hunters Association. Although every interested citizen could not participate in this first public input phase, no stakeholder group purposefully was excluded and additional opportunities to participate were being provided.

Common Themes

Each focus group was asked the same questions about their attitudes on hound hunting, experiences they had with hound hunting, and changes they witnessed relative to the sport in Virginia. All focus group participants noted that land ownership in rural Virginia has changed over the last 10 years; development was fragmenting the remaining open farm lands and new people moving into these areas often were unaware of rural traditions, including hunting with hounds. In many instances, focus group members believed these changes were reducing access for all types of hunting. Another common theme noted in nearly all focus groups was that many of the issues associated with hound hunting resulted from the actions of a few "bad apples." Focus



group participants generally agreed that hound hunting is a valuable, important part of Virginia's hunting tradition, but a small number of highly visible hound hunters effectively was jeopardizing the sport for all. Nearly all focus group participants concluded that greater respect and understanding for others are needed by all stakeholders—landowners as well as hound hunters—if meaningful solutions are to be implemented.

Issues and Concerns

Focus group participants identified a number of issues related to hound hunting, based on their personal experiences, stories they had heard from neighbors, friends, and family, or situations conveyed through the media. Issues identified by focus groups as being important to address during the Hunting with Hounds in Virginia process included hunter ethics, landowner education, running hounds out of season, hunting from the road, lining roads (with vehicles), right-to-retrieve, hounds running on posted property, trespassing, interference with other recreational activities (hunting, horseback riding, walking/hiking), inconsistent laws/regulations, and property damage.

Staying Informed

Focus group meeting summaries are now available on the VDGIF web site. To receive a copy by mail, please call Sarah Kozlowski at 540-231-0961.

Focus groups:

- *Bear Hound Hunters*
- *Deer Hound Hunters*
- *Fox Hound Hunters*
- *Raccoon Hound Hunters*
- *Other Hound Hunters*
- *Non-Hound Hunters*
- *Private Landowners*
- *Government/Corporate/NGO Landowners*
- *Animal-Welfare Interests*

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Hound Hunting Survey Now Available!

An informal survey about hound hunting in Virginia, developed by researchers at Virginia Tech, now is available. Its purpose is to identify and compare the experiences of affected stakeholders on issues related to hunting with hounds in Virginia. This public input opportunity should not be construed as a chance to vote for or against hunting with hounds in Virginia; rather, it is another way relevant information can be passed to the SAC, Virginia Tech, VDGIF and their Board, and other decision makers about issues related to hound hunting in the Commonwealth. All issues relevant to hound hunting, whether perceived to be positive or negative, are being addressed in the informal survey. In addition, the informal survey will help to characterize the types of stakeholders impacted by hound hunting in Virginia.

The informal survey is available to anyone who wants to take it. Although it is a valuable tool, a survey conducted in this open manner cannot provide statistically accurate estimates of public opinion on such complicated issues. For this reason, results will be summarized and considered as yet another type of public input, similar to the focus group meetings, content analysis of letters and emails, and comments received during public meetings.

The informal survey is available in both on-line and paper formats. However, the on-line version has been password protected to prevent mass submissions. To take the on-line version, visit the VDGIF web site and follow the instructions provided on how to obtain a unique access password. Paper versions of the informal survey are available at VDGIF headquarters in Richmond and Regional Offices throughout the state. Completed paper versions can be returned to the VDGIF Regional Office or mailed to Sarah Kozlowski, 111 Cheatham Hall, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA 24060-0321. Paper versions also can be requested by calling 540-231-0961.

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